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Waste Watching in Oklahoma: Illegal Dumping Poses Problems for Oil Companies, Public

By Terry-Cobo, Sarah

Article excerpt

On a dark gravel road in northwestern Oklahoma, Brad Ice witnessed a crime in progress. Ice, a field inspector for the Oklahoma Corporation Commission, was driving home from work late. A red tanker truck sped down the road. When the dust settled, Ice could see a black streak on the white gravel road: oil waste, dumped illegally. He sped to catch up with the truck, following the trail to an asphalt road about a half mile ahead. The truck was gone.

"I do this for a living, and I can't even catch them," Ice said.

Though he had a good idea of which trucking company was involved based on the truck's markings, he had no license plate number, so he couldn't prove it. To enforce the commission's rules, inspectors like Ice need a witness who can provide identifying numbers from the truck. They also need samples of the waste, although sometimes a sample doesn't provide sufficient evidence to link the waste to a particular well or truck.

Oil and water

What separates the oil and gas drilling boom of today from that of the 1970s and '80s is the amount of waste. The easily accessible oil and gas is mostly gone. In some parts of Oklahoma, every 42 gallons of oil comes with about 420 gallons of very salty water, known as produced water.

Although waste disposal was once an afterthought, companies today file for permission to dispose of the wastewater at the same time they request permission to drill - an indication of the vast volume drillers now expect, said Tim Baker, manager of the pollution abatement program in the Corporation Commission's oil and gas division.

Large operators tend to follow the rules and often surpass minimum requirements when drilling a well and disposing of waste, such as produced water and drilling mud. Despite those efforts, there are truck drivers who slosh, leak, spill, and intentionally dump waste in rural areas across Oklahoma.

In some cases, inexperienced drivers don't notice a valve that slips, leaking 40 or so gallons as they speed down paved highway. In other cases, exhausted truckers have worked all night; ready to finish their shift, go home and shower, they don't notice when 40 gallons slosh from the top of an over-filled truck as they turn a corner too quickly.

The most egregious example is when a driver intentionally dumps waste to make more money. He knows inspectors like Ice don't work nights or weekends. It's easy for a driver to open the valve over a deserted country road late at night, pouring

nearly 6,000 gallons of contaminated water onto the ground. The worst scofflaws collect a handful of run tickets, but deliver just one truckload of waste to a disposal well, still charging the well operator for disposing of everything, including the loads dumped illegally. That's profitable for the trucker because disposal wells are often dozens of miles from the drilling sites; it saves a lot of time and fuel.

The problem isn't just greed, it's also lack of oversight. Only commercial disposal wells require constant monitoring. Because many private disposal wells do not have staff members to monitor trucks and waste, it's nearly impossible to tell if a trucker's run tickets match the number of loads properly dumped.

Another problem is simply detecting the waste. Drilling mud is easy to spot on a country road: the black or brown telltale signs are obvious. Saltwater, which comes with almost every well drilled in the state, is much more difficult to see and the liquid evaporates from the grueling heat of the summer sun, before anyone notices.

Potential for problems

Produced water can be 100 times as salty as seawater, and can kill plants, trees, fish and wildlife. It can also contain trace amounts of heavy metals, and carcinogens such as benzene. For humans, there is no safe level of benzene exposure, according to World Health Organization reports. Drilling mud can also contain small amounts of harmful chemicals. …

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